

SHOUTS & MURMURS

EMILY DICKINSON, JERK OF AMHERST

BY ANDY BOROWITZ

IT was with great reluctance that I decided to write about my thirty-year friendship with Emily Dickinson. To many who would read my book, Miss Dickinson was a cherished literary icon, and any attempt to describe her in human terms would, understandably, be resented. And yet by not writing this book I would be depriving her most ardent admirers of meeting the Emily Dickinson I was privileged to know: more than a mentor, she was my anchor, my compass, my lighthouse.

Except when she was drunk. At those times, usually beginning at the stroke of noon, she became a gluttonous, vituperative harpy who would cut you for your last Buffalo wing. Once she got hold of her favorite beverage, Olde English malt liquor, the "belle of Amherst" would, as she liked to put it, "get polluted 'til [she] booted." This Emily Dickinson would think nothing of spitting chewing tobacco in a protégé's face, blithely explaining that she was "working on [her] aim."

Who, then, was the real Emily Dickinson? Daughter of New England in chaste service to her poetry, or backstabbing gorgon who doctored your bowling score when you went to get more nachos? By exploring this question, I decided, I had a chance not only to learn about Miss Dickinson but also to learn about myself, and to learn even more about myself if the book went into paperback.

When I first met Miss Dickinson, I was a literary greenhorn with a handful of unfinished poems, struggling to find my voice and something that rhymed with "Nantucket." Believing that she would be more likely to take me under her wing if I appeared to be an ingénue, I entered her lace-curtained parlor in Amherst dressed as a Cub Scout. But she took no note of my attire as she read over that day's work: "Parting is all we know of heaven, / And all we need of hell." Putting down her quill, she

brushed the bonnet-crowned curls from her forehead. "Well, it beats stealing cars!" she croaked in a husky baritone.

Declaring that "quittin' time is spittin' time," she reached into her sewing box for a pouch of her favorite "chaw," as she called it, and pulled a "tall and foamy" out of the icebox. She generously agreed to look over my poems, pork rinds spilling from her mouth as she read. Finally, she anointed my efforts with words of encouragement that would sustain me throughout my early career: "You're a poet and you don't know it. Your feet show it. They're long fellows. Now I gotta hit the head."

Years passed before I saw another, less merry, aspect of Miss Dickinson's character, at a book party for Ralph Waldo Emerson. Miss Dickinson was experiencing a trough in her career; she had been reduced to writing advertising copy, most notably, "Nothing is better for thee/Than me," for Quaker Oats. At the party, Miss Dickinson sat alone at the bar, doing tequila shooters and riffing moribund, angry couplets that often did not scan. I sensed that it was time to take her home.

In the parking lot, she stopped abruptly near Emerson's car. "Let's key

it," she said, her eyes dancing maniacally. I assumed that this was just "Emily being Emily," and tried to laugh it off. "Don't be such a wuss," she said, scratching "Waldo sucks" into the passenger door. I gently upbraided Miss Dickinson for her actions, which only served to inflame her: "Emerson's trying to steal my juice, baby. It took me years to get where I am, understand what I'm saying? I used to run three-card monte on the streets of Newton. And I ain't goin' back!" At this moment, I found myself confronted with a possibility that I had never wanted to consider in all our years of friendship: Emily Dickinson was a real jerk.

Some years later, Boston University asked me to moderate a panel including Miss Dickinson, William Dean Howells, and the author, long since forgotten, of the verse "Finders, keepers / Losers, weepers." I was by this time a successful poet in my own right, having become renowned for my series of "Happiness Is..." gift books and pillows. Seated next to Miss Dickinson, I attempted to mend the breach that had developed in our relationship; I went on at some length about my debt to her work. She took a sip of water, cleared her throat, and replied, "Bite me, you self-aggrandizing weasel."

The last time I saw Emily Dickinson, she said she didn't have time to speak, as she was on her way to the greyhound races in Taunton. But I could not let her go without asking what had happened to our friendship. Her eyes downcast, she said, simply, "You've got ketchup on your tie." Quizzically, I lowered my head and took a right uppercut to the jaw. As I crumpled to the pavement, Miss Dickinson unleashed a profane tirade, along with a pistol-whipping that was startling for both its vigor and its efficiency.

As I review this last memory, it occurs to me that some readers might conclude that I am trying to cast Emily Dickinson in a negative light. Nothing could be further from my intentions. In fact, when I regained consciousness I realized that Miss Dickinson, in her tirade, had given me a final, precious gift. True, I no longer had my wallet, but I had, at long last, a separate identity, a voice. And, perhaps most valuable of all, a rhyme for "Nantucket." ♦



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